MINUTES

Approved
82.1 The Minutes of the meeting of 13 May 2014

ACTION SHEET

Received
83.1 An update on progress on actions agreed at previous meetings (SP 2013 49)

Postgraduate marketing
83.2 The implementation of the new market strategy for postgraduate taught provision was ongoing.

Academic English support
83.3 The College Secretary was discussing the best way of providing rooms for academic support between 5pm and 6pm with the Space Planning Manager.

Operational Excellence
83.4 The OE Programme Board would make a formal report on progress in the Operational Excellence Programme to the next meeting of the Strategic Planning Committee.

MASTER'S REPORT

Noted
The Master and the Director of External Relations had met with Nick Hillman, the Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, to discuss Birkbeck’s efforts to promote the interests of part time students and raise awareness of the damage done to part time higher education under the new fees and finance system. HEPI emphasised the importance of continuing to engage with the Labour party on the issue of part time, as the College had already been doing through avenues such as the Birkbeck Briefing. Birkbeck have been asked to put together a proposal for HEPI on how the College would wish the Government to address the downturn in part time students if there was a significant amount of money available for this; this was likely to be based on the Welsh system although there was a need for further analysis of the impact of this system on part time students in Wales. It was felt that there was a possibility that this proposal might represent a potential way forward for part time under a future government.

85 SCHOOL AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICES PLANS 2014-15
Received
85.1 The narrative planning statements of the Schools and Professional Services (SP 2013 50 and SP 2013 50A-F)

Noted
85.2 Members noted that development of the College’s plans and strategy for the estate should not only focus on the needs of students, but also reflect the College’s commitment to research by taking into account the research needs of all the Schools. The College Secretary would discuss this further with the Executive Deans outside of the meeting.

86 RESEARCH DATA
Received
86.1 A note on development of research grant and performance data (SP 2013 51)

Noted
86.2 The Vice Master Designate and the Pro Vice Master for Research had considered how to monitor performance on College level research strategy in the context of the planning round and the development of central research support. It was proposed that an additional set of budget iteration and review meetings be held alongside the Schools, Professional services and student financial support meetings, reporting back to Research Committee and Strategic Planning Committee. These meetings would consider metrics on research grants and contracts and research students and bring actions back to SPC for approval.

86.3 Members discussed the data that was already available to the Research and other Committees. There was evidence that the College had largely recovered from the withdrawal of Sure Start funding, and that research funding was now more broadly
based across the College. They noted that in the table showing research income by academic FTE and department, there were some differences that were to be expected due to disciplinary variation and some that would need further exploration. It was noted that the FTE data could be skewed due to differences in the numbers of staff who were eligible to apply for grants. For example, some junior staff on three year contracts were not eligible. The table also demonstrated the impact that could be made by a single large grant coming to an end.

86.4 Members asked for further data to be included in the table to allow for comparison of the number of grants by department. Other useful data to inform discussion on research would be comparison data of research income by subject from other institutions. The impact that research funding could have on overall funding for the college due to overheads should also be monitored.

86.5 Members discussed whether there was a need for a new research meeting, and noted that in the past it was felt that Research Committee and the Research Students Sub-Committee had been unable to respond strategically on the basis of the data currently available. It was important that thinking around research was tied into the wider college planning process, and that strategic action was taken as a result of the available research data.

86.6 Currently, there was wide variation in the level of detail in the proposals on research in the School plans, and the work during the REF had indicated that different departments had different levels of engagement with and organisation around research. It was felt there was a need for discussion of actions that could be taken as a College which did not fall under the remit of the Research Committee, including strategic discussions about how to support staff in a way that improved the research culture of the College. These discussions should also include the issues around research students.

86.7 It was suggested that there should be Key Performance Indicators on research that would define the College’s goals in this area: for example, whether we should plan for research income to grow in absolute terms, or as a percentage of total income.

Action
86.8 (MI, SF) Discuss with the Executive Deans what the relationship should be between the Research Committees, the PVM Research, and the Deans, who have the responsibility for implementing research strategy.

87 BUDGET PROPOSALS
Received
87.1 An updated draft of the budget forecasts and Income Distribution Model for 2014-15 (SP 2013 52)
Noted

87.2 The forecast surplus was £3.3M after moderation, an increase from the £2.5M reported in May. The differences were largely due to higher fee income than had previously been projected due to additional international numbers in the School of Business, Economics and Informatics, errors in the Planning Tool that had been corrected, and higher HEFCE T grand income than had been predicted.

87.3 Members noted that while research income was important, there were many different ways in which the College and the Schools could generate income, and that increasing income from sources other than research funding could give greater freedom around research.

88 STUDENT RECRUITMENT

New marketing narrative

88.1 At both the SPC and Governors Awaydays, it had been noted that Birkbeck’s student body was becoming increasingly complicated. The College was now operating in all the mainstream recruitment arenas in a way that it hadn’t done previously, and it was important that the College’s external messaging clearly communicated Birkbeck’s unique and distinctive proposition.

88.2 The Committee heard an initial report from Alison Cahn, a consultant who had been working on developing a new communications narrative for Birkbeck. During the course of this work she had spoken to staff and students, including the majority of the Executive Deans, and noted the overwhelmingly positive nature of the feedback that she had received about the College.

88.3 The consultant noted the following key themes which had come out of the consultative process so far, which would be considered when developing the messaging:

- Birkbeck students believe that studying at the College will improve their lives, and are therefore purposeful and serious about learning.
- Students value the high quality of debate and engagement at the College, which comes partly from the fact that both academics and students at Birkbeck go out into the world. Students bring their experiences from their jobs and elsewhere into the classroom: learning has a richer texture because it is more integrated into life.
- The College’s academics are felt to be engaged with the wider world, and its location in central London allows for engagement with life in London.
- The quality of teaching is felt to be high, characterised by being supportive without spoon-feeding students.
88.4 The Committee discussed the direction of the new messaging, and agreed that while acknowledging those things which made Birkbeck attractive to all students, i.e. the quality of the institution, the teaching, and the student support, the focus should be on emphasising Birkbeck’s differences and their advantages. The College was not just offering the same experience as at other universities in the UK but in the evening, but offered a different and richer way of studying, as the feedback from staff and students suggested. Members noted that this approach tied in with the work on the Strategy for Learning and Teaching Enhancement, which should be brought into the development of the final messaging.

88.5 A set of messages for would be developed by September for the 2015 prospectus. The focus would be on Birkbeck’s own distinctive nature rather than attempting to segment the message for different groups of students.

88.6 Although it was not felt that this messaging should attempt to appeal to research students, who had a different set of concerns and priorities than other students, members suggested that some of the College’s particularly distinctive researchers should be highlighted as part of this work, to reinforce that by joining Birkbeck students were joining a knowledge making community. It was noted that it was increasingly common for undergraduate students across the sector to be involved with research, and that many Birkbeck undergraduate students had the opportunity to undertake research projects.

Recruitment monitoring
Received
88.7 The current student recruitment monitoring report (SP 2013 53)

Noted
88.8 Overall applications to Birkbeck were up 16% compared to last year and offers were up by 49%. If applications followed the same trends as previous years, this would be the crucial stage of the recruitment cycle where we should expect to see substantial month on month increases in applications between now and the start of the new academic year.

88.9 Applications continued to fall for UG part-time and foundation degrees, meaning that offers made at these levels were down by 12% and 11% respectively. Applications from international students had increased by 11% compared to last year, and offers to international students had increased by 51%.

88.10 SPC heard that although there had only been a small increase in applications to postgraduate masters (1% to PT programmes, and 5% to FT), this was against the trend of declining applications elsewhere in the sector.
UCAS recruitment update

Received

88.11 An update on UCAS recruitment (SP 2013 54)

Noted

88.12 The College’s UCAS recruitment was beginning to look more like that of other institutions, with significant numbers of students selecting Birkbeck as their insurance choice for the first time. While there were likely to be low conversion rates from students holding the College as their insurance offer, this did indicate that Birkbeck’s profile among UCAS applicants was increasing.

88.13 This change in student behaviour during the ‘mainstream’ phase of Birkbeck’s recruitment cycle indicates the importance of continuing to pay close attention to UCAS recruitment as it was difficult to predict what would happen. Although higher numbers of students have made Birkbeck their firm choice this year than last year this represented a lower percentage of the total number of applicants. It was vital that the College did not under-recruit against its Student Number Control target, so work would need to be done with each School to monitor numbers regularly over the summer. It was confirmed that the College could not be complacent about the potential for either under- or over-recruitment.

88.14 It was proposed that the current UCAS group should be expanded by two Assistant Deans from each School (or other colleagues working on UCAS admissions if more appropriate) so that they could liaise with relevant School Executive meetings and keep the Schools aware of and engaged with developments as they occurred.

88.15 Members discussed the mechanism for deciding that Schools would need to either stop or expand recruitment. The UCAS group would operationalise any such decision but it would need to be made by senior management. SPC noted the potentially significant consequences of any area of the College erroneously being told to either stop or increase recruitment. It was agreed that potential scenarios on when, if, where and how recruitment might be stopped would be discussed, along with information on current recruitment, at a meeting with the Vice Master and the Executive Deans at the end of June.

89 FLEXIBLE STUDY PROJECT

Received

89.1 A note on progress and next steps in the Flexible Study/online module choice project (SP 2013 55)

Noted
89.2 The online module selection trial was proceeding for 2014-15 enrolment. An expanded trial, which would incorporate most postgraduate taught programmes and some undergraduate programmes, would take place in 2015-16.

89.3 The group also looked at the possibility of pro rata fee charging for Masters programmes. However, there would not be a trial for this in 2014-15 as it had not been possible to reach agreement on a common approach to charging, and there was limited uptake for a trial with the models of flexibility proposed.

**Agreed**

89.4 That a discussion and consultation process should take place, bringing in as many programme leaders/directors as possible to understand:

- The flexibility currently offered and the extent to which existing structures support or impede this.
- Possible models of flexibility, for example starting programmes in January and intensive programmes, and the implications of this for pro rata or modular charging.

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**90 CATALYST PROGRAMME UPDATE**

Received

90.1 An update on progress in the Catalyst programme *(SP 2013 56)*

**Noted**

90.2 HEFCE has confirmed that the Catalyst funding had been awarded and would be received by the College shortly.

90.3 Although the College wished to promote the success of all its students, it was noted that the Catalyst project was aimed specifically at full time intensive students.

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**91 ACCESS FOR UNENROLLED STUDENTS**

Received

91.1 A note on discussions on access and availability of services for students who had interrupted or completed their studies, or were in debt to the College *(SP 2013 57)*

**Noted**

91.2 It had become clear that there was the need for a clear policy on the facilities and access that should be available to those without current student status. After discussion, the following proposals were agreed for presentation to SPC:

**Students on ‘ Interruption of Studies’**

91.3 To encourage students to maintain contact with the College during their interruption, physical access, Moodle access and email access should be maintained,
as should Library access although borrowing rights should be suspended. At the end of a two-year period a message should be sent to the student alerting them to the fact that their record is about to be terminated, with a mechanism put into place to also alert the relevant School so that they can follow up with a personal message if appropriate. If no response is received the termination should be carried out.

91.4 It was noted that the Executive Deans had been discussing the potential to rebrand interruptions in studies as “student sabbaticals”, to present them as an option which students could take rather than as leaving the College, and therefore promote the students’ continuing engagement with Birkbeck during the break.

Students with tuition fee debts

91.5 Current practice is to send reminders to students who owe tuition fee payments at 15 days, 45 days and 60 days, after which the student’s record is terminated. In practice, the student is not prevented from attending the College. It was proposed that the 15 and 45 day warnings should in future outline explicitly the potential sanctions if the situation is not resolved by 60 days. If no appropriate action is taken by the student by the 60 day reminder, the student’s access rights, Moodle access, library access, access to workstation rooms, and ability to view personal timetables, exam timetables, module registrations, confirmation of enrolment, status and exam results should be withdrawn. Email access should be maintained in order to facilitate any attempt by the student to pay the outstanding fees. Once an engagement recording system is in place, consideration should be given as to whether this can be used to identify students whose records have been withdrawn due to tuition fee debts, but who continued to attend classes.

91.5 It was confirmed that this was in line with the current College policy on debtors, and with the Office of Fair Trading’s good practice guidelines on the treatment of debtors, as it would apply only to tuition fee debt and not other kinds of debt.

Students suspended from the College

91.6 In accordance with the College’s Code of Student Discipline, “the Academic Registrar or nominee may recommend that the Master suspends a student or imposes restrictions on membership, attendance at the College or access to its property or facilities” pending a formal disciplinary hearing. This action would only normally be taken in the event that the student was considered to be a danger to others. Such a student would, of course, remain ‘innocent until proved guilty’. Potentially the suspension might take place at a critical time in the student’s academic progress. Therefore, the student would retain the right to access all facilities but would not be permitted to attend any classes or College buildings or have access to workstation rooms. Special permission would be necessary from the Academic Registrar in the event that the student then wished to attend in order (e.g.) to attend
examinations or to seek advice from the Students’ Union etc., although in practice of course there would be no physical means of preventing access to the site.

**Students having completed their course**

91.7 The point at which a student completes his/her course is not necessarily easy to define. It is proposed that students’ records should be recorded as ‘study complete’ at the end of the October following the completion of their studies. Thus, access rights to College facilities and services would be removed and the right to access College buildings, Moodle, and library access, and access to workstation rooms would be withdrawn at that point. However, e-mail accounts would be left open in order that communications about degree ceremonies may be continued and access to My Birkbeck would be retained so that students can see their results when available.

91.8 It is recognised that the open access policy for the College’s Malet Street building implies that even where a student’s ID-card has been de-activated, there would be nothing to prevent that student from entering the building. Further discussion needs to identify the most appropriate means by which security or other staff can check whether an individual currently has the right to be on Birkbeck premises in the event that that individual is behaving in an inappropriate manner in the building.

91.9 **Be Birkbeck**

It is apparent that there is a potential for ex-students of the College to continue to use its facilities by joining Be Birkbeck, and, in a small minority of cases, for using its facilities in an inappropriate manner. It is to be welcomed that Be Birkbeck provides a route for former students to carry on an association with the College and to use its services; however, some former students are using the facilities either to an excessive level or in an inappropriate manner. It is therefore proposed that the Terms and Conditions for membership of Be Birkbeck should include procedures for terminating membership for individuals abusing the associated privileges.

**Approved**

91.10 The proposals on access for un-enrolled students, and the amendment of the College Regulations where necessary to support them. The Academic Registrar would hold further discussions with the PVMs for Research and Postgraduate Study on whether this policy should apply to research students.

91.11 Members discussed the attendance requirements for international student visas and the impact on these of interruptions in study and of online learning modules. It was noted that even if a student took some online modules it should be possible to identify ten attendance points for them. The Academic Registrar would clarify these issues to the Executive Deans.
91.12 Work would continue as part of the lecture capture project to clarify who should have access to online lectures and other such material. Members expressed the view that these should only be available to registered students, not those who were on a break in studies or who had been withdrawn due to debt.

92 RISK MANAGEMENT

Received

92.1 The report of the Risk Management Group on the management of risk in 2013-14 (SP 2013 58)

92.2 The draft Risk Register for 2014-15 (SP 2013 59)

Noted

92.3 The risk profile had changed and overall had improved. The top risks, financial sustainability and student recruitment, had remained at the top although their likelihood scores had decreased. The likelihood scores of the risks around student retention, progression and success and the Research Excellence Framework had increased.

93 BIRKBECK AND UNIVERSITY LEAGUE TABLES

Noted

93.1 League tables were important and could have a huge impact on the College’s future success; it wasn’t felt that the current position of Birkbeck was a good reflection of its quality.

93.2 It was necessary to analyse the list of league tables that Birkbeck would appear in and our estimation of where we were likely to rank. This would require more understanding of the date returns that had been made. A potential menu of 'quick fixes' should be considered, along with a longer term strategic approach. This work would link with some of the existing work that had been done around the National Student Survey and the Key Information Set.

94 DISABLED STUDENTS

Noted

94.1 The Minister of State for Universities and Science was proposing significant changes to the Disabled Student Allowance from 2015-16, under which Higher Education Institutions would become responsible for many of the resources now provided by the DSA, with no additional government funding to support this. The Disability Service Manager had reported that it could be expected that Birkbeck would be disproportionately impacted by these changes in comparison with other institutions due to the particular demographics of the College’s students. Disabled students at Birbeck may, for example, be less likely to own appropriate computer equipment before they begin their course as they are less likely to have just left school, and they
may have more complicated needs and require support such as one to one mentoring. It could be argued that these changes were more likely to discriminate against older disabled students than younger ones.

94.2 It was also noted that Birkbeck has a significant percentage of disabled students, at 11%. Members suggested that it might be useful to make contact with other institutions that might be similarly affected by this change. It would be helpful to produce a one page summary that outlined the key issues raised by the changes and the equality case against them.

**Action**

94.3 *(BW, TK)* Discuss the political and public discussions that the College could have about these issues.